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Activities of the Joint United Nations Information Committee

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 46/73 B of 11 December 1991, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit the reports of the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC) to the Committee on Information at its consecutive sessions. The present report, covering the activities of JUNIC during 1998, has been prepared in response to that request.

2. JUNIC held its twenty-fourth session at the headquarters of the International Fund for Agricultural Development in Rome from 8 to 10 July 1998, under the chairmanship of Richard Leclair, Programme Manager for Health Communications and Public Relations of the World Health Organization. Directors of information and officials of 25 United Nations bodies, including specialized agencies and related organizations, attended the session. The report on the session was submitted to the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). JUNIC considered a variety of topics relating to inter-agency cooperation in public information and communications matters. A brief summary of the discussion and an account of some of the follow-up action on decisions taken at the session on issues that could be of interest to the members of the Committee on Information is set out below.

3. JUNIC continued its broad-based discussion of ways and means of promoting better public understanding of the role and achievements of the United Nations. It welcomed the importance attached by the Secretary-General to the role of public information and communications as an integral part of the substantive programme of the United Nations and concurred with the view that a communications dimension should be integrated into the work of all organizations of the United Nations system at all levels, with a view to promoting the relevance of the United Nations system to the daily concerns of people everywhere. It also recommended that the issue of information and communications be raised, as appropriate, in the executive bodies of all organizations of the system, and proposed that ACC place a broad-based discussion of the strengthening of the information and communications capacity of the United Nations system on the agenda for one of its forthcoming meetings.

4. JUNIC also discussed ways and means of improving its effectiveness as a forum for discussion and exchange of experience and views on strategic aspects of communications and public information among information professionals within the system. It agreed on the need to reinvigorate the Committee, especially between sessions, and to strengthen ongoing communications among members through the development of an Intranet connection, teleconferencing, ad hoc visits during the year and other means in order to better use the existing machinery in the coordination of system-wide public information and communications initiatives.

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5. Several members of JUNIC emphasized the crucial importance of strategic communications as a means of generating broader support for the objectives of the Organization, both internally, through the development of a culture of communications at all levels of the Organization, as well as in dealing with potential outside partners. It was agreed that communications training should be provided at all levels in member organizations as a means of providing an internal constituency for a broad-based communications outreach. JUNIC also emphasized the need to provide a public information and communications budget for all major United Nations initiatives, including major observances and special sessions of the General Assembly. It was also noted that communications outreach should not be limited to the media, but should also include constituencies that can generate political and financial support for the organizations of the system, such as legislators, government departments, non-governmental organizations and the business community, all of which should be approached as possible advocates for shared objectives. JUNIC emphasized the importance of a rapid response capacity within all organizations of the system, enabling them to respond to inaccuracies and distortions about their work, preferably within the same news cycle.

6. JUNIC agreed to continue the discussion of different aspects of this topic at its twenty-fifth session, to be held in 1999, and agreed on the need to streamline its agenda to devote more time to a broad-based exchange of views on one or two themes of interest to all organizations of the system, with specific topics and speakers to be decided upon by the Chairman in consultation with other members of the Committee.

7. JUNIC also discussed several issues pertaining to the Non-Governmental Liaison Service, which complements the role played by relevant units within the organizations of the United Nations system in providing public information and liaison services to non-governmental organizations. JUNIC decided to bring to the attention of ACC the continuing precarious financial situation of the Service and requested it to give this matter its urgent consideration. JUNIC also endorsed the proposal that, through its lead agency, the United Nations Children's Fund, the Service should approach the United Nations Foundation for financial support for its information outreach and communications programme.

8. JUNIC also continued the discussion of issues pertaining to the proposed United Nations participation in the Hannover Exposition 2000, under the theme "Humankind, nature, technology". The representatives of the Organizing Committee for the Exposition briefed the Committee on the status of preparations and the search for corporate sponsorship for United Nations participation, which, according to the ACC guidelines for United Nations participation in international expositions, is only possible on a no-cost basis. Following the session, the Department of Public Information, as the lead agency for United Nations participation in this event, continued negotiations with the host authorities and with the Government of Germany on various aspects of United Nations participation.

9. JUNIC also considered the information programmes and activities leading to the 1998 observance of the fiftieth anniversary of United Nations peacekeeping and of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the information programmes and activities for the five-year review of the International Conference on Population and Development and the observance, in 1999, of the International Year of Older Persons. JUNIC also initiated the discussion of a possible public information and communications programme leading to the Millennium Assembly and NGO Forum, to take place in the year 2000.

10. Given the importance of developments relating to the use of computer technology in the field of public information, JUNIC decided to convene a meeting of its Technical Advisory Group, which is chaired by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. In view of the critical importance of incorporating public information and communications objectives in the organization-wide strategy in matters of information technology, JUNIC suggested that representatives of both the technology and information units be invited to the proposed meeting. JUNIC also noted that the compatibility of computer software in all organizations of the system was an essential element for its broader use as a communications tool. Following the session, the Chairman of JUNIC circulated to the members a questionnaire on the parameters of system-wide guidelines for the posting of information on United Nations-related Web sites, with a view to developing such guidelines and submitting them to ACC for its consideration.

11. The twenty-fifth session of JUNIC is scheduled to take place at the Vienna International Centre from 6 to 8 July 1999, at the invitation of the International Atomic Energy Agency. In the course of the session, the Committee will take up a wide range of issues of mutual concern, aimed at further strengthening inter-agency cooperation in the field of public information. In addition to the resumption of its consideration of ways and means of promoting better public understanding of the role and achievements of the United Nations, JUNIC is expected to look into the arrangements for United Nations participation in the Hannover Exposition 2000, and consider a broad range of public information and

communications activities leading to the Millennium Assembly. In accordance with the principle of rotation, JUNIC will also submit, for ACC endorsement, a recommendation on the chairmanship of the Committee for the next two-year term (2000–2001).